

Make 10 minutes with a lawmaker count

Contributed by Daniel A. Mica
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When I was a congressman representing a South Florida district, I appreciated meeting with constituents who could communicate their message effectively. They knew the basics that I myself now follow as a lobbyist. They had a clear message, they could deliver their points quickly, and they were respectful of my time.

Unfortunately, not everyone follows these basics. This is why even the most seasoned lobbyist needs to ask if his or her association members/advocates really know the particulars of an effective Hill visit. I have been on the Hill for 40 years as a congressman, staffer and lobbyist, and even I still come away from certain meetings saying I wish I had prepared a little more.

From my vantage point, there are several critical areas that need to be reviewed occasionally to keep visits sharp and on point. First and foremost, make sure everyone is on message. Otherwise, you will fail from the word go. To ensure success, I find it best if a visiting local group designates one spokesman who can articulate a clear message quickly. At the same rate, everyone in the group still needs to be prepared to help the spokesman and answer questions.

Time management is critical. In our credit union world, we sit people down and teach them to stick to three top points. We caution our folks that small talk should last no longer than the 30 seconds it takes to greet the member and walk to a chair. We advise our citizen-advocates to recognize the member's typically hectic schedule and have them say, "I know you're busy, so let me get right to the point."

When such lessons are not followed, the results can be disastrous. Years ago, a group and I had rehearsed for a visit with a senior ranking senator. The group's spokesman was prepped and ready to go. When he entered the senator's office, he noticed a picture on the wall, asked the senator about it and lost focus. All the spokesman and senator talked about was the photo, and then suddenly the lawmaker had to leave. The entire purpose for the visit was never discussed.

It's another example of why association and interest group members need to know that congressional schedules can be juggled around at any moment. I can say from firsthand experience that 90 percent of what's scheduled is beyond a member's control. When that bell rings for a vote, it's time to go; when a local TV crew needs an urgent interview, it's time to go; when a colleague, the governor or a mayor calls with a crisis, it's time to go.

You would be surprised by what can happen when folks enter a congressional office. In my two decades as a lobbyist, I've seen more than one Fortune 500 chief executive become speechless in front of members and administration officials. If it can happen to them, it can happen to anyone.

Folks still violate the old but essential rule: Never assume. Case in point - folks assume the member they are meeting with shares their level of focus on an issue.

When I was in the House, I witnessed this error all the time. I would be running from one hearing to the next or darting to a news conference, and a constituent would meet with me for a brief visit. While this constituent was well-meaning and sincere, he or she might say something like, "Congressman Mica, please support us on H.R. 2163" or "Help us on H.R. 32." So as to avoid embarrassing them or me, I would nod and say, "Thank you so much. I'm really pleased that you shared your views with me." When the constituent left, I had to ask my staff what the visitor was talking about.

There will be times when constituents will disagree with a member, and people may be tempted to lose their sense of decorum. Therefore, it is important to remind folks to show basic respect and courtesy at all times, no matter what they may think of the member. I recall an incident some years ago during which a hometown constituent became so upset that he poked his index finger into a member's chest to make a point. The member later called me, and I had a lot of apologizing to do on behalf of our group.

It also is critical to remind advocates about the importance of working with staff. There is a tendency for groups to focus solely on the member, when the staff is just as important. After every meeting on the Hill, I find out the name of the key staffer handling my issue, and immediately write that person a summation of what the member and I agreed upon. It's the staffer who will be responsible for getting the message to the member.

Last but not least, folks need to be reminded about thinking on their feet - literally. The 20-minute meeting that was scheduled in the senator's office may turn into a brief walk-and-talk from one hearing to the next. The mantra to advocates is the same today as it was when I was in Congress: You've got five minutes to meet. Be smart and make those five minutes work to your advantage.

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unions with 90 million members. He was a congressman (D-Fla.) from 1979-89.